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Treasury Accuses Iran of Aiding Al Qaeda

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WASHINGTON — The Treasury Department on Thursday accused the Iranian authorities of aiding Al Qaeda and said it was imposing financial sanctions on six people believed to be Qaeda operatives in Iran, Kuwait, Qatar and Pakistan.

Weighing in on the puzzling question of whether Iran's Shiite regime seeks to help the primarily Sunni Al Qaeda, Treasury officials asserted that the Iranian government had entered into an agreement with operatives of the terrorist group and was allowing the country to be used as a transit point for funneling money and people from the Persian Gulf to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The officials say they have become convinced that Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil, whom they described as a "prominent Iran-based Al Qaeda facilitator," is operating in Iran under an agreement between Al Qaeda and the government.

"This network serves as the core pipeline through which Al Qaeda moves money, facilitators and operatives from across the Middle East to South Asia, including to Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, a key Al Qaeda leader based in Pakistan," the Treasury said in a statement.

Mr. Rahman, another of the six people named in the Treasury action, is believed to have recently ascended to the No. 2 position in Al Qaeda, reporting directly to the organization's new leader, Ayman al-Zawahri, who took over after the death of Osama bin Laden.

"By exposing Iran's secret deal with Al Qaeda allowing it to funnel funds and operatives through its territory, we are illuminating yet another aspect of Iran's unmatched support for terrorism," said David S. Cohen, the Treasury under secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence.

The Treasury action means that Americans are barred from engaging in commercial or financial transactions with the six people. Any assets they might have under American jurisdiction are now frozen, administration officials said, though the officials acknowledged

that there were probably few such assets. The officials said the sanctions were nonetheless meaningful because they would serve to demonstrate that Iran was working with Al Qaeda.

Indeed, one senior administration said the action sought to expose both “a key funding facilitation network for Al Qaeda and a key aspect for Iranian support for international terrorism.”

“Our sense is this network is operating through Iranian territory with the knowledge and at least the acquiescence of Iranian authorities,” the official said in a conference call with reporters.

Iran detained several senior Qaeda operatives who fled there after the American invasion of Afghanistan and has kept many of them under house arrest. In 2009, though, American officials learned that Iran had released Osama bin Laden’s son, Saad bin Laden. More recently, intelligence officials say they believe that Iran has agreed to better conditions for Qaeda operatives in Iran, including the organization’s top military strategist, Saif al Adel, who had been held under tight security.

Still, officials admit that they are largely in the dark about what is going on with the Qaeda operatives believed to be in Iran.

The Treasury did not name any Iranian government officials in Thursday’s action. The other men named were Umid Muhammadi, who Treasury said had petitioned Iranian officials on behalf of Al Qaeda to release operatives detained in Iran; Salim Hasan Khalifa Rashid al Kuwari, an operative based in Qatar who Treasury said provided financial and logistical support to Al Qaeda through facilitators in Iran; Abdallah Ghanim Mafuz Muslim Al Khawar, another Qatar-based operative whom Treasury says has helped to facilitate travel for extremists headed to jihad in Afghanistan; and Ali Hasan Ali al Ajmi, described as a Kuwait-based associate of Mr. Khalil who provides financial and logistical support to Al Qaeda.

Any Iranian connection to Al Qaeda and the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, has long been debated. Al Qaeda, which adheres to a radical Sunni theology, often denounces the Shiite sect that holds power in Iran, and the Qaeda branch in Iraq has often singled out and killed Shiites there. But intelligence officials believe that any cooperation between Al Qaeda and Iran against the United States has been limited and cautious.